

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-19WASHINGTON POST
19 September 1984

Soviet Defector Now Charges That West Coerced Him

By Celestine Bohlen

Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Sept. 18—A senior Soviet journalist made a dramatic reappearance here today a year after defecting to Western Europe and said he had been drugged, tortured and coerced by the British secret service.

Oleg Bitov, 52, the former foreign culture editor of the Literary Gazette, a prominent Soviet current events weekly, told a press conference that he had been kidnaped by western intelligence agents at the Venice film festival last September, secreted off to London and dragooned into making anti-Soviet statements.

In London, the British government described Bitov's allegations as "absurd."

Bitov, looking pale but calm, said his request for asylum, granted by the British government last year, was a "fabrication [that] belongs, wholly and entirely, to the specialists of the British intelligence services."

"I happened to experience a wide array of techniques and expedients

of the 'cloak-and-dagger' gentlemen: blackmail, stage-managing of provocative situations, application of medical innovations for inhuman purposes, bribery, threat of being discredited in the eyes of the Soviet people and, finally, the use of violence," he said in a nine-page statement that was distributed today in four languages.

The Moscow press conference, held by the official Novosti news agency, provided a forum for what the Soviets apparently saw as a chance to turn an embarrassing defection into an attack on the "wanton, merciless and cruel" tactics of western intelligence agencies.

When Bitov was first reported missing last year, the Literary Gazette carried articles claiming he had been abducted. Articles in the western press at the time speculated that he was a Soviet agent and that his defection was a coup for the West.

The reappearance today came several weeks after Bitov, who had lived in London since last October, again disappeared. Friends told British newspapers that he had inexplicably failed to keep appointments. His car was found illegally parked near the Soviet Embassy in London and more than \$48,000 was left in his bank account.

Bitov's disappearance led to speculation that he had returned to the Soviet Union to join his wife Ludmilla and 15-year-old daughter Xenia, or that he had been kidnaped by Soviet agents.

Today, Bitov said he had returned of his own volition, calling any other explanation "complete nonsense."

"I myself decided to return to the Soviet Union, myself bought the ticket and left Britain by air, that time without 'escorts,'" he said, but he refused to give details about the trip, which he said took place three weeks ago.

A spokesman for the British Home Office said in London, "It is clear that his return to Moscow has prejudiced his own future and that he is telling a story of most advantage to the Russians in countering the allegations that he made in the United Kingdom."

On his arrival in England last October, Bitov said he had fled the Soviet Union to escape "a new era of persecution directed against freedom of conscience and expression."

Bitov, a translator of English and American science fiction as well as a journalist, wrote several articles for British newspapers and went to the United States in May and June on a speaking tour sponsored by Reader's Digest.

Bitov said he had feigned acquiescence in the West "to lull the vigilance of my captors" and agreed to cooperate in purveying "anti-Soviet trash."

Asked if he would renounce his statements about the "stifling" atmosphere for writers in the Soviet Union, Bitov said only that his writings had been heavily censored.

"You always say in the West that there is no censorship. Allow me to say that is a lie," he told reporters.

Bitov today mentioned no future plans other than to complete his book, titled "The Year-Long Film Festival."

The Literary Gazette's foreign editor, Igor Belayev, said today that Bitov "will return to work with us," although he did not know in what capacity. Belayev said the weekly will begin to publish excerpts of Bitov's book in the next few weeks.

Belayev described Bitov as a "very ordinary" man. "He is not a hero, as he said, but an ordinary journalist, to some extent talented," said Belayev.